

2001

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A PRENTICE HALL GUIDE
SOCIOLOGY
ON THE INTERNET

**EVALUATING ONLINE
RESOURCES**

M. Neil Browne  Stuart M. Keeley

2001

A PRENTICE HALL GUIDE

Sociology

ON THE INTERNET

Evaluating Online Resources

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Bowling Green State University



Upper Saddle River, NJ 07458

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Upper Saddle River, NJ 07458

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 0-13-027759-2
Printed in the United States of America

Preface

Students increasingly rely on the Internet as their preferred resource for finding information and arguments. We wrote this book largely because our own students have persuaded us that this tendency is part of a long run trend. As the authors of *Asking the Right Questions: A Guide to Critical Thinking*, we have already addressed in a fairly thorough fashion how the art of critical thinking can be applied to books, articles, speeches, and lectures. But we wanted to address a different audience who needs a slightly different set of critical questions when assessing what they think they have learned from websites.

Critical thinking is a set of skills and attitudes for *evaluating* arguments. The arguments made on websites need especially careful evaluation. The ease of access to the Web applies to those who wish to express themselves on the Web, as well as to those who wish to learn from it. Hence, we must use what we find on the Internet with great caution. In this book we describe a process for doing so.

It is unlikely that you are reading this manual without some basic understanding of the Internet and its features. Furthermore, we're pretty confident that most of you have considerable knowledge of the Internet. Numerous "Internet guides" are available to help the beginner connect to and browse the Internet. We recognize, however, that some readers may be new to the Web, so we begin with two chapters on the basics of the Internet. Three appendices provide additional information on documenting online sources, a guide to the Companion Websites which are likely to accompany your Prentice Hall textbook, and a glossary of terms to help you navigate through the terminology you will encounter when exploring the Internet.

The primary purpose of this book, however, is to help you develop a critical-thinking approach to your use of the Internet. After reading this guide you will have the tools to evaluate all the material you find on the Web.

In the preparation of this book, we have been assisted by two talented and creative assistants, Carrie Williamson and Elizabeth Barre. Both are much more than student assistants. Their devotion to high-quality work is inspirational to us as teachers.

For use of material from their Web pages, the authors of:

<http://www.netspace.org/herald/issues/100397/speech.f.html>

<http://www.ceousa.org/>

<http://www.fcc.state.fl.us/fcc/state.fl.us.fcc/reports/methods/estimates.html#probs/>

<http://www.fairtest.org/facts/satfact.htm>

<http://sun.soci.niu.edu/~critcrim/guns/gun.viol>

<http://www.calvin.edu.edu/academic/engl/346/proj/vduyn/index.htm>

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and Colin Kenny, the author of

<http://sen.parl.gc.ca/ckenny/itstime.htm>

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Chapter 1

Finding Your Way

This thing that we now call the Internet has been evolving ever since it was first developed almost thirty years ago. Its prominence in our society has been increasing exponentially in recent years.

The Internet was born as the solution to a problem. It was designed to provide a global communication channel for the exchange of scientific information and research. Gradually, however, the Internet has also become a digital post office, a digital bulletin board, a digital telephone, and a digital tutor. Its real merit to you is how it will solve *your* problems and make *your* day just a bit more manageable. Hopefully, that is what you'll discover here.

Getting Started

The following URL's are a few of the many beginner's guides available on the Internet. You'll find everything you need to know about modems, browsers, e-mail, bulletin boards, chat rooms, and getting connected to the Internet on at least one of these sites.

An Introduction to the Internet from Interactive Connections

<http://icactive.com/guide/index.htm>

This is a very comprehensive guide to the Internet. It is provided by Interactive Connections, an Internet Presence Provider. If you need a refresher course on Internet basics or are starting from scratch, then this site will help.

Learn the Net

<http://www.learnthenet.com/english/index.html>

Learn the Net specializes in online training products and services for the corporate world. Their guide is well written and up-to-date. It is an excellent source of information for the beginner.

Net Guide from PC User Magazine

<http://www.pcuser.com.au/netguide/>

This guide is sponsored by the Australian version of *PC User* magazine. In addition to a selection of articles about tools and techniques for experienced Web surfers, this site contains many useful resources for the beginner.

Many of you reading this guide have a lot of experience with computers, while others have little or none. Before proceeding, you should have and be familiar with a few basic resources:

1. computers
2. Web browsers
3. Internet connections

Don't worry if you can't afford your own resources. There are many free or inexpensive options available to you, and we'll do our best to show them to you. The use of computer labs is now a common and even required component of most courses. Also, we're pretty confident that these computers have one of the popular browsers by Netscape or Microsoft and an Internet connection. If you haven't found your campus computer lab yet, then our guess is that you'll find it associated with your campus library. From a beginner's point of view, the only real concern you'll have is learning the basics.

Searching the World

Although many wire-heads consider the Internet to be the largest library on the planet, it doesn't necessarily have the easiest card catalog in the world. In this section, we'll explore techniques for searching the Internet, discuss practices for evaluating the validity of the content you find, discuss online education, explain CD-based Companion Website learning, and review guidelines for citing information within your class assignments. With practice, these skills will help you improve your usage of the Internet.

There is one skill, or rather behavior, that you must adopt in order to maximize your time-to-gain ratio. That is, be aware of "search drift." The Internet is an information jungle and if you wander into it without having a sound idea of why you are there, or if you just wander around without being aware of where you are, then you will get "lost" and waste a great deal of time. Yes, there are times when you will want to play, wander, and have a good time, but consider whether the best time to do that is the night before a test.

Searching

Yahoo! is a good place to begin. It is only one of many resources available on the Internet. It's easy to remember. If you have a chance, log onto the site and follow along as we describe how to use it.

Yahoo!: <http://www.yahoo.com>

Yahoo! began as a simple listing of information by category—kind of like a card catalog. As it's grown, it has added the ability to search for specific information—and many, many other features that we encourage you to explore. At the top level of the directory there are several very general categories, but as you move deeper into the directory, notice that the categories become more specific. To find information, you simply choose the most appropriate category at the top level and continue through each successive level until you find what you're looking for (or until you realize you're in the wrong place). Don't be afraid to experiment—it's easy to get lost but also easy to find your way home. Because Yahoo! cross-references among the categories, you'll find that several related categories will lead you to your desired page.

Prepare yourself for a search *before* you jump into one. In the long run, it will save you both time and frustration. Don't be afraid to try some strange approaches for your search strategy. A good technique is to pull out your thesaurus and look up other names for the word. You might be able to find a more common form of the word. Think of everything associated with your question and give each of these subjects a try. You never know what might turn up a gold mine of information.

The following list of resources contain many more helpful tools, tips, and techniques for searching the Internet. If you have specific academic needs, many of these tools are what you'll want to use.

Librarians's Index to the Internet

<http://lii.org/>

Nueva School Search Strategy Planner

<http://www.nueva.pvt.k12.ca.us/~debbie/library/research/adviceengine.html>

NoodleQuest Search Tools

<http://www.noodletools.com/noodlequest/>

**Using Internet and Web Search Engines Effectively
An Online Course from the American Library Association**

<http://www.ala.org/ICONN/advancedcourses.html>

Search Engines

A more direct approach to finding information on the Web is to use a search engine, which is a program that runs a search while you wait for the results. Many search engines can be found on the Web. Some Web search engines are commercial and may charge you a fee to run a search. Search engines are also available for other parts of the Internet: Archie, Veronica, and Jughead are examples of such search engines.

As mentioned earlier, Yahoo! has a useful search engine. Another search engine that is used frequently is called Lycos (<http://www.lycos.com>). It's simple to operate but, as with any search tool, it takes practice and patience to master. Take the time now to connect to Lycos, and we'll take it for a test run. When you first see the opening page, you'll notice that it is very complex. But it's an excellent resource, and the instructions on the page will tell you almost everything you need to know. To search, enter a word into the white text-entry box and press the submit button. Lycos will refer back to its database of information and return to you a page of hyperlinked resources to various sites on the Internet that contain your search word.

When you type in a word or category to search, you'll notice that some of your results don't seem to apply to your topic. This is one of the pitfalls of search engines. They are very fast, but they don't think—that is your job. A search using the term "coral reef" is just as likely to turn up a link to Jimmy Buffett's Coral Reefer Band as a link to coral reef research. To perform an effective search, you will need to spend time *before* the search preparing a search strategy. When you do research using an automated tool like a search engine, you can expect many links to be unrelated to your topic of interest—but all in all, search engines are still very powerful tools.

Another type of search service that you'll hear much about is called a meta-search service. This type of service will send your query out to a number of different search engines and then tabulate the results for you. Meta-searches come in many different levels of sophistication and they also generate a large amount of information. If you're not intimidated by volume then give one of them a try.

Here's a meta-search tool that is both fun to use and powerful. Give it a try.

Ask Jeeves

<http://www.askjeeves.com>

One last word on search engines. These tools don't directly search the Internet. They actually search a database that is derived from the Internet. Here is how it works: Search engines use robots (automated programming tools) that search for and categorize information. This information is placed into a database. It is this database that you search when you use the search engine. Can you think of a potential problem with this system? Unfortunately, the quality of the database depends on the effectiveness of the robot that assembles the database. This is why you should not rely on just one search-engine tool. Use several because what one does not find, another might. You shouldn't have trouble finding other search engines if you don't like the ones we list here. Both of the major browsers now include a basic menu button that will connect you to a large collection of different search engines.

The following resources will help you learn more about searching the Internet.

How To Search the Web from Palomar College

<http://daphne.palomar.edu/TGSEARCH>

Search Engine Watch

<http://searchenginewatch.com>

<http://searchenginewatch.com/resources/tutorials.html>

Search Guide

<http://www.searchengineguide.org>

Meta-Search Engines Guide

<http://www.hampton.lib.nh.us/srchtool/recmetaengines.htm>

Chapter 2

Staying In Touch

Although the Internet is sometimes thought of as a flashy, graphically rich waste of time, it began as a tool to enable researchers to communicate between research labs across the United States. If you look at its basic features, the Internet is still a valuable and effective tool for communication. In essence, one goal of the Internet has been to eliminate the hindrance of geography on the free exchange of ideas. Whether it becomes a waste of time or a time-saving tool is entirely up to you. We hope the following ideas will help you make the most of the Internet as a tool for communication and collaboration.

A Mailbox In Cyberspace

An e-mail account is the most basic of methods for planting yourself in the Internet community. Do you have one? Don't worry if you don't. We have a number of simple, inexpensive, and fast solutions you may want to consider.

There are a few options available to you. You may be able to apply for an e-mail account through your college. If your college doesn't provide student e-mail accounts, then e-mail service through an Internet Service Provider (ISP) is a second option. ISPs require you to subscribe (meaning spend money) to acquire their service. The nature of service, hourly or monthly, will depend on your anticipated use. Although you will need to pay a fee for the service, there is an advantage because you can expect help from time to time, which you are not as likely to receive from other options.

Should you wish to pursue this option—and if you have the cash—you can find a national list of ISPs at the following address: <http://www.boardwatch.com>. Costs average about \$20 per month depending on the services that you use. We suggest that you do not sign a long-term contract with an ISP until you are certain that you are happy with the service that particular provider offers. Most providers offer a free trial period before any formal commitment is necessary. Test the system at various times during the day to be certain that sufficient access is provided.

A third option, which is increasing in popularity, is to choose a free e-mail service provided by one of the many online companies. Yes, a free e-mail account with many of the bells and whistles found in a regular e-mail account can be yours for the asking. If you choose a free e-mail service, then read the fine print and understand what it means to you. In most cases, the service is provided to you free because the provider is making its money by selling advertising space to other companies. This is the same way that search engine companies and television stations make their money. In order to read your mail, you have to wade through a few commercials prominently posted on your e-mail reader. An additional condition of these free e-mail accounts is that they will gather information about you in order to customize and target the display of commercials for you. In most cases, this information is used only to target you with commercials, but always read the fine print.

The following are only a few of the more prominent services offering free e-mail and free Internet access in general. Read the fine print in their service agreements, and choose the one that offers you the most. Also, don't be afraid to change services if you're not getting what you expect.

E-Mail Service	Web Address
AltaVista	http://www.zdnet.com/downloads/altavista/
BlueLight	http://www.bluelight.com
Hotmail	http://www.hotmail.com
Juno	http://www.juno.com
Netscape	http://webmail.netscape.com
NetZero	http://www.netzero.com
WorldSpy	http://www.worldspy.com/freeisp/isp.html
Yahoo!	http://mail.yahoo.com

So, now that you're on your way to your own e-mail account, what are you going to do with it?

Simple Suggestions

If you wish to skip all of the instructions, here are a few suggestions to keep you out of trouble.

- Write down the user ID and password for your account. It's difficult to read your e-mail if you can't get into your account.
- Change your password periodically. Someone stealing your login information could do a number of unscrupulous things with your account and reputation.

- Don't use the same password for all of your accounts. Yes, it is much easier to remember if you do, but it is also much easier for someone else, too.
- Watch out for e-mail viruses. They are common and can unintentionally be passed through attached documents.

E-Mail and Your Instructor

E-mail is becoming a very common and popular way for students and instructors to communicate outside of class. As you progress through college, it is likely that you will have numerous e-mail exchanges with your instructors. The following should help you greatly.

- When communicating with your instructors, use correct spelling, grammar, punctuation, and clarity—just as you would with a carefully crafted letter.
- Most instructors will refrain from sending confidential information through e-mail since one can't guarantee the security of the message. Therefore, it is best not to request confidential information, exam scores, or course grades electronically.
- If you are asked to submit assignments electronically, be very careful as to the timing and the format you select.
- Smaller bits of text, such as summaries or project descriptions, can be sent in the body of the message; however, larger documents, including graphs and tables, should be sent as attachments. Your instructor will give you specific instructions about submitting such documents.
- Most instructors will have a mechanism for acknowledging receipt of important documents. If you have not received an acknowledging document, be certain to check by phone or in person with the instructor. It is the student's responsibility to be certain that all assignments are received in an acceptable form.

E-Mail Etiquette

Etiquette is especially important with e-mail communication. When engaged in a conversation, it is likely that you are also communicating information with the inflections in your voice, the expression on your face, and the posture of your body. If you take any or all of these away, there is a greater chance for miscommunication. Here are a few suggestions to help you out in the e-mail world.

- Say what you mean, say it concisely, and say it very carefully—once you've sent it, it is "there" and cannot be retrieved. We have all had to follow-up a vague or hurtful e-mail with explanations or apologies.
- Get to the point—your instructor is probably very busy and will be unwilling to read a tome. If you want to chat then we suggest a pizza.
- Use the subject line—it's a quick way to tell the other person what you want.